

IGUANAS, SALMONELLA AND HERPETOCULTURE: A CONFLICT OF INTEREST...AND CONSCIENCE?

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As editor of *Iguana Times*, they seem to come across my desk with increasing and alarming frequency. I see them in professional journals, popular magazines, memos from herpetoculturists. They've infested the internet as well as my e-mail. There's little doubt about it, they've gotten my attention.

Of what am I speaking? Reports of humans becoming infected by salmonella from their iguanas and other reptilian pets. Reports of children, pregnant women, and immunocompromised individuals becoming deathly ill—and some even dying. Letters from parents concerned about their children. Newsbriefs from herpetoculturists panicked about potential legislation.

Iguana iguana, the popular but overexploited exotic pet of the 1990's, is on everyone's mind these days. And so is *Salmonella*, a minuscule little gram-negative bacterium that can be seen only with the aid of a microscope. With the increasing popularity and availability of hatchling green iguanas in the United States, more people are purchasing iguanas and other pet reptiles today than at any time in history.

I can certainly understand the concerns of health officials and the public at large. True, salmonella infection from iguanas and other reptiles may be of trivial significance compared to other sources of salmonella infection. Outbreaks of salmonellosis from bad hamburger meat has made news in recent years. Salmonella can also infest raw eggs, chicken parts and other foods cooked improperly or left out at warm temperatures too long. Other types of bacterial infection from popular pets, including cats (toxoplasmosis and cat scratch fever) and parrots (histoplasmosis and psittacosis), may be more common than salmonella infection from reptiles. Nevertheless, the fact remains: some people are getting ill (see, for

example, the article from Centers for Disease Control in *Iguana Times*, Vol. 4, September 1995).

What I fail to understand is the totally misplaced concern of a segment of the herpetocultural community. Whereas some breeders and sellers take on the appropriate responsibility of informing would-be pet owners about the risks, I see many that are whining and fussing about how "overreaction" to the rare, isolated incidents is resulting in bad publicity. They're concerned that new legislation may restrict or limit sales of their low-overhead "produce." Many are quick to dismiss the reports, arguing that health officials often misdiagnose the source of infection—never mind that the salmonella serotypes (strains) cultured from the victims are common in reptiles but virtually absent in traditional pets, as well as in ordinary herpetophobic humans. They're panicked about their livelihood. How else will they put bread on the family table, and pay for their next collecting junket to Madagascar? And this, the money aspect, is where I see a serious conflict of interest.

Few pets today are less costly—and more expendable—than the green iguana. As many as a million hatchlings each year are sold in U.S. pet stores. The overwhelming majority of these animals die within their first few months. Most new owners are, for the most part, ignorant about how to care for their new pets. Given the low replacement cost for their pet (\$10-20), who would bother taking the lizard to a vet when the first symptoms of ill health become apparent? Because the iguana often falls sick before it is even sold, the signs of ill health often go unrecognized until the animal simply dies. But should the hatchling be lucky enough to thrive and eventually attain adult size, it may become ignored or ill-treated thereafter until it dies. More often it is released in a most inhospitable environment or

relocated to a new home. Don't even think about calling a zoo since they are inundated with offers of unwanted iguanas.

After considering the fate of the average baby iguana, why then are so many pet iguanas sold? Because money speaks louder than the conscience—and much louder than a dying lizard. If more herpetoculturists and reptile brokers truly cared for the critters they proclaim to love so dearly, surely they'd give this little fellow a break. With a profit margin that is miniscule compared to so many other herps, surely these marketers of mass mortality could lighten up a bit on the iguanas. But, sorry to say, green bills in the wallet are much more important than millions of green little ghosts floating out the windows of every other herpetophilic home in America.


If some of the louder-hissing herpetoculturists are speaking out to avoid an outright ban on the sale of all reptiles, that would be more understandable. But we're talking here about a single, overexploited species that is neither inexpensive nor easy to keep in captivity. When one particular pet supplier labels as a "knee-jerk reaction" recent contemplation of possible restrictions or an outright ban on the sale of all green iguanas in the state of Oregon, I have to wonder what he's really thinking about.

Really, what *is* he thinking about? I'm thinking about a few thousand baby iguanas that just might suffer a less shameful fate than they would in Oregonian homes. I, for one, think it would be a good idea, whether legislative or otherwise, to reduce the number of baby iguanas exploited as discardable live "toys" in the United States. To me, Oregon would be a good start.

To sell more expensive reptiles with less exacting care requirements to well-heeled, well-informed hobbyists is one thing, but mass-marketing baby green iguanas to anyone having a few bucks in the pocket and a videotape of Jurassic Park at home is another thing altogether. The truth is that *every* reptile dealer *knows* that baby green iguanas are doomed from the word go. At under \$20, every kid on the block wants one. A quick glance in virtually any pet store would reveal the sorry conditions under which the languishing lizards are kept before even being sold.

The emaciated little babies gather in bunches on a single unchopped leaf of iceberg lettuce, their skin dangling from their ribs. Several unsampled chunks of dog food and a gleaming dog bone reside in one corner of the cage, and an insurmountable twelve-inch pitcher of water in the opposite corner.

"God help us all," the reptile brokers cry out. "They're gonna shut down the sale of iguanas just like they did the baby turtles." How many of them ever saw the tears of children as they buried their short-lived turtles? Baby iguanas will be banned next! Just imagine how many children will be deprived of the joy of seeing the toes of a lizard curl under, its mouth agape, in the final paroxysms of death. How tragic such legislation would be!

It's really quite ironic, all the fuss over a few kids and other folk becoming sick because of iguanas. So many herpetoculturists today are expressing their frustration and alarm—not over the kids that become ill, but because iguanas may one day be banned from commercial sale. They've missed the point altogether. They're whining about the wrong issue. I suppose I should feel sorry for these misguided people who have chosen to stifle or disregard their conscience. But I feel more compassion toward the iguanas and the unfortunate few humans who become ill because of them. 

Iguanas can indeed become gentle, amiable—even magnificent—pets if their needs are properly understood and appreciated. Indeed, the very existence of the International Iguana Society is due, to no small extent, to the surging popularity of iguanas and the need to communicate information to pet owners. Thousands of pet iguanas are alive and well today because of responsible individuals—breeders, dealers, veterinarians, product manufacturers, textbook authors and the like—who offer sound, honest advice on how to care for iguanas as pets.

Although salmonella infection by reptiles is a relatively rare occurrence, the threat is very real and can be minimized by appropriate precautions. The International Iguana Society advocates the recommendations established by the Centers for Disease Control (see Iguana Times, Vol. 4, September 1995).

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Galapagos land iguana,
Conolophus subcristatus.
Photograph: William Hayes